

Delaware Diary

Snares and Traps 5/4/05

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by

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Long ago, according to a Native American legend, there was a great hunter named, “Rabbit” who lived deep in the forest. One winter, Rabbit set traps and laid snares to catch game. When he checked his snares, he discovered that he had captured a glowing white creature. Although Rabbit could not kill the brilliant creature, he was able to bombard the shimmering white object with great globs of clay. The creature explained to Rabbit that he was the Man in the Moon; and he asked to be set free so that he return home before dawn. After he promised never to return to earth, Rabbit released the creature that flew away in a light so dazzling that it nearly blinded Rabbit. Today, the clay marks can still be seen on the moon, and rabbits blink and their eyes water whenever they encounter a strong light.

Although the story of Rabbit and the Man in the Moon did not originate in Delaware, the hunter’s use of a snare to capture game is a significant detail of Native American life that has nearly been forgotten. Centuries ago, Sussex County abounded with game. In the 18th century, a description of the Great Cypress Swamp catalogued the birds and animals that were commonly found in southern Delaware. A great variety of birds, muskrats, raccoons, weasels, otters, squirrels, rabbits and bears inhabited the swamp. In addition, when the naturalist Thomas Nuttall visited the swamp in 1809, he reported that “...in this part of the swamp there are bears not infrequently met with as many as seven having been caught not many months back.”

Less threatening were the large numbers of smaller animals. In the late 18th century, it was noted that “Rabbits are found here in such plenty that a person without giving himself much trouble might kill 30 of them in a day.”

The of profusion game in southern Delaware presented the Native Americans an abundant supply of food; and to understand the early inhabitants of southern Delaware, archaeologists need to understand what the region was like before it was developed by humans. In the 1940's, the noted Delaware archaeologist, C. A. Weslager recalled what it was like to sail on the Indian River: “From our position in midstream we could look back at the sun shimmering on the rolling waters of the majestic inlet and the ocean beyond. ... Suddenly it dawned on us that the study of nature is highly important and necessary for a thorough understanding of primitive living. These birds over the river, the fish beneath the surface, and the animals on the banks all played a role in the day life of the early man who dwelt on its shores... As we learn to understand more about Delaware's plants, birds, and animals, we shall be better qualified to... interpret archaeological findings.”

During his career, Weslager uncovered countless pottery shards, arrowheads, and other artifacts left behind by the early inhabitants of Delaware. Yet he and other archaeologists often overlooked how Rabbit had captured the Man in the Moon. The abundant game could only be converted to a supply of food if the Native Americans understood the animals and found an efficient way to capture them.

Several years ago, Kevin Cunningham, Archaeologist for the Delaware Department of Transportation, and archaeologist Chris Espenshade of the firm Skelly and Loy, were intrigued by about a site that had been discovered near Wilmington. The evidence indicated that the site had been visited for very short periods, perhaps only an

hour or so at a time, but on several occasions several thousand years ago. Cunningham and Espenshade discussed what sort of activity could have occurred at the site that was so fleeting, but bore the obvious signs of human activity. Espenshade suggested it might have been associated with trapping.

There were two types of traps that could be used to catch game. Native Americans could set snares made with a length of line attached to a spring pole. The line was looped around the bait that enticed the animal within range of the snare. A simple trigger mechanism activated the snare when the animal attempted to reach the bait. In southern Delaware, snares were used to capture birds and small animals, such as muskrats, raccoons and rabbits.

On the other hand, a “deadfall” was used to kill larger game. A deadfall used a log, rock or other heavy object positioned over the baited area. As with a snare, the animal tripped the trigger when it attempted to reach the bait. The trigger removed the support for the heavy object, which landed on the animal and killed it. Dead falls were used to kill animals as large as deer and bear that were prevalent in Sussex County.

The effective use of snares and deadfalls required a thorough understanding of the eating habits of the target game. Using snares and deadfalls had several advantages over plodding through the Great Swamp in search of game. After a hunter set up a system of these traps, he was then free to perform other chores. As in the story of Rabbit and the Man in the Moon, the hunter checked his traps periodically to see if any game had been caught.

Chris Espenshade believes that the use of snares, deadfalls and other traps was once common in Sussex County. He points out that some groups referred to the

Nanticokes as the Trappers. These devices, however, were made of wood and natural fibers that quickly degrade when left in the soil. Usually the only discernable archaeological clues that trapping was being conducted in an area are the sites where the capture game was collected to be skinned and butchered. In southern Delaware, there is evidence that trapping continued into the 19th century before the practice vanished like Rabbit's Man in the Moon.

Sidebar

As part of Delaware Archaeology Month, Chris Espenshade will present a demonstration of traditional traps at Nanticoke Heritage Day, Saturday May 7, at the Nanticoke Indian Museum. In addition, Espenshade will give instructions on making small pinch pots out of clay. Both children and adults will have an opportunity to make their own pots, which they can decorate with traditional Native American tools. The activities for Nanticoke Heritage Day run from 10:00am to 3:00pm at the Nanticoke Indian Museum located at the intersection of Routes 24 and 5.